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ABSTRACT

A. E. van Vogt's theory of "unreality" explains in part how he has become so prolific in a literary genre--science fiction/science fantasy--which only recently has experienced a rise in popularity. His theory states that the science fictional sentence must have in it something that requires a contribution from the reader. If the author of reality writing has done a proper job, the reader will not need to make further inferences or contributions. Science fiction requires "unreality" writing, which in turn evokes a contribution from the author, focuses on something the reader associates with or knows about, and presents an enduring reality that will still be alive 20 or 30 years from now when current reality stories are dead. Van Vogt tends more toward science fantasy in that he strives for a "far-out" quality in every story. His science fantasy requires a greater contribution from the reader than science fiction and so may last longer. In addition to his "unreality" formula, van Vogt uses a technique in which he awakens himself every 90 minutes during a night's sleep, which increases his writing output and allows him to expedite solutions to the problems he encounters in his stories. (HTH)

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On a summer's evening at his home in Hollywood, A. E. van Vogt told me: "I have about fifteen beginnings of novels lying around here and about twenty-four beginnings of short stories. But except for these, I've completed my study of science fiction!" He winked and laughed.

In the past three years van Vogt's novel based on general semantics premises, The World of Null-A, has sold over 200-thousand copies in France alone.[1] A new paperback edition is currently available in the United States.[2] The novel was first

published in Astounding Science Fiction magazine in 1945 and subsequently published in hardback in 1948.[3] A sequel, The Players of Null-A, was first published in 1948, and is also currently abailable in reprint.[4] He is now working on a third novel based on general semantics. The amount of his published works in the field of science fiction alone, is staggering.

How can this man be so prolific in a literary genre--contemporary science fiction/science fantasy--which only recently has experienced a rise in popularity among laymen and become more acceptable to academia?

"I have a theory about this," he told me. "The science fictional sentence has to have in it something which requires a contribution from the reader, ala McLuhan. I understood this, without understanding McLuhan's analysis of it, long ago." Thus, as McLuhan gives us a rationale for the popularity of television, (the "coolness" of the medium), a similar reason, (participation), is posited by van Vogt for the current popularity of science fiction/science fantasy. "I always tried to put into my stories and into my sentences this kind of requirement, that the reader would have to add something." Van Vogt's idea seems to make sense in this age of participation.

"We have in science fiction[5] the pulp style, which is a lot of imagery. Pulp can be very bad and apparently it can also be very energetically written. The style offends certain critics. The reason it offends them is because of its lack

of reality, among other things. The writing itself is not reality writing. There is a difference between reality writing and unreality writing. I call this unreality writng that we're doing in science fiction. In order to have this, /unreality in science fiction/ we have to have the sentence written as I've mentioned it and it constantly requires from the reader a contribution. Whereas, /in/ reality writing, if the reader has to make a contribution then the author has not done his job--he's not described enough of the feelings of the way the person is, or of how he's sweating or how his muscles are twitching, how his eyes are hurting, how the stench from the perspiration is beginning to bother him and that kind of thing. I could write reality writing /but/, it kind of offends me though! Here we have all of this business of people living in the world, going to hospitals, feeling sentimental about this or sentimental about that, spreading a girl's legs, how important it is to make a decision about what job you're going to take. These are all true things but there are people who want to read about them endlessly and I can't do that. I had my time of reading Arnold Bennett, who was a great reality writer, among other people. I enjoyed them at the time but there came a moment when I didn't want to read about how somebody's breath smelled."

I asked van Vogt, to describe his kind of Unreality writing.

"You have to have a combination of this kind of thing. You have to have in a science fiction story this contribution that the reader has to make. That's always an unreality sentence. Then you have to have in there something that he associates with--you cannot have him in a grey world that has nothing to do with anything that he knows nothing about. This is a human being here, or at least it's something that, if he's a tried-and-true science fiction reader, he may be able to take an alien in the opening line. Then, in the story, if it's going to last, there has to be something that is an enduring reality. If you can find that, then your story will still be alive twenty ro thiryt years from now when all of the currently quaint reality stories are dead."

I asked van Vogt to take those three factors--which he calls his "trinity of requirements" for a story--and apply them to, The World of Null-A.

"In The World of Null-A we open up with a very unusual situation--the games situation, which the reader has to try to understand from moment to moment. What's going on here? These people are gathering in this hotel and suddenly my hero is out of the hotel because he's been discovered to be a phoney. There he is, [the hero], out in the street and there are no police and these are things that he [the reader], can associate with to some extent. Yet, what we begin to discover is that we're dealing with a system plot--the general semantics thought idea, which is the enduring reality in The World of Null-A. It spans time because it is still valid

twenty-eight years later, or whatever the time is [since Korzybski's intorduction of general semantics to the world]. Whereas, just think of all the stories in the early Saturday Evening Post, Liberty, Colliers, that you can't find. I used to read in Redbook a writer called Royal Brown. He wrote little short stories which I thought were cute. I thought [recently] 'wouldn't they still be cute to me today' I can't find Royal Brown anywhere! He wrote a sort of romantic-type story of it's time which would be, I'm sure, absolutely dead in today's world of looking at romances. I call those things the current, quaint reality. And we've got a bunch of them right now! So the writers, in my opinion, who are obsessed too much with the current, quaint reality will be dead ten years from now, as writers."

If A. E. van Vogt writes "unreality," then does he produce science fantasy instead of science fiction?

"I used to call my stuff 'science fantasy," I actually called it that when I met the author of, The Saint.[6] He said, 'Oh, your're a science fiction writer!' I said, 'Heinlein is a science fiction writer--I'm a science fantasy writer.' The thought that was in my mind was that I try to have a far-out quality in every story. That's not exactly science fiction... But, I'm in the science fantasy field and I have a feeling that that's going to last longer than science fiction, basically because it requires more of a contribution from the reader."

Over the years, van Vogt has developed and refined a sleep technique which has become part of his writing method. (He has recently developed the system to aid in self-hypnotism in order to work out personal problems.) Other than a basic interest in the field, van Vogt originally turned to writing to supplement his income. "...We were close to starvation...." What he wrote could be sold. There was a correlation early established between material finished and money added to the family coffers. Increased output and subsequent sales were accomplished by van Vogt when he woke himself every ninety-minutes during the course of a normal night's sleep.

He would have a note to himself by the bed which he would immediately see upon waking! "You're working on this story, remember?" For a few minutes he would think about a particular problem in the story he was currently writing. He would go back to sleep and be awakened again in another ninety-minutes. This resulted in expediting the solutions to story problems and his output was increased appreciably. "I would say that it, [the sleep method], made it possible for me to write my stories and remain a writer." He did this for approximately 300 nights per year early in his career, especially after he became a full-time free-lancer.

Around 1964, van Vogt further developed his middle of the night methods into what he calls his, "dream therapy theory." He uses this system now for not only his writing but for personal problems. Even the hardware has been sophisticated,

to wit, an industrial timer and a cassette tape recorder.[7] He "scans" in his mind for a few minutes the problem which he wants to solve. This is done three times during any one night and sometimes several nights are spent on the same problem. The system has been used often enough, van Vogt feels, to verify that solutions to problems are expedited in this manner. He admits, however, that this technique might not work for some other people. "This is how I woke up one morning and said: 'By God, that's how you write plays!" He had been working in the area of plays prior to that time. "Something let go inside me and I has an answer, just like that!" He dropped all other work in progress and wrote a sequel to Moliere's, Le Malade Imaginaire. Someone at the California Institute of the Arts "was completely delighted with it.[8]

Another time, he woke with: "By God, that's how you learn languages!" He now reads and understands several languages but cannot speak them.

Through his sleep therapy system van Vogt has also "figured out" how to exercise and how to make money. The latter resulting in his book, The Money Personality.[9]

"I don't see how they can do any better," van Vogt told me, "than figure out some method of using dreaming as a therapy in the Thirtieth Century."

Included in van Vogt's formula writing are patterns which he may sometimes spend years in searching. In further describing his writing methods he says, "I'm a system person all the way through. I write in 800-wrod scenes, approximately." His scenes include five steps: (1) set the location on a

subjective basis, that is, include feeling and imagery and from a point of view; (2) stating the scene purpose either explicitly or implicitly, and the latter he prefers; (3) the bulk of the scene which is an interchange between the character and main purpose and some outside force; (4) establishing clearly the success of failure of the character or characters involved in accomplishing the scene purpose; and (5) in early scenes, suggest that things will get worse. This is the way van Vogt turns a series of short stories into a novel. "I was one of the few people who thought of doing that. I was I was criticized for it, but it was survival, [for me]."

When we has finished our interview, van Vogt and I stood before the picture window in his living room and looked out over the night and smog-enveloped city below us. We drank apricot juice and I wondered how I could leave this dreamer and his extrapolations for the Thirtieth Century and drive down off "the hill" and into the contemporary realities of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue.

FOOTNOTES

[1]A. E. van Vogt. le monde des A. Translated from English to French by Boris Vian. Paris: J'ai Lu, 1970.

[2]Berkley Medallion Books, 1974.

[3]Simon & Schuster, 1948. The novel was written too proselytize Alfred Korzybski's major published work in general semantics, Science And Sanity: An Introduction To Non-Aristotelian Systems And General Semantics, by The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1933. The latest edition available from the Institute for General Semantics, Lakeville, Connecticut 06039, or, the International Society for General Semantics, 640 Powell Street, San Francisco, California 94108.

[4]Berkley Medallion Books, 1974.

[5]In most of the interview van Vogt used the term "science fiction" to include "science fantasy."

[6]Leslie Charteris Saint novels have been published inthe United States by Doubleday.

[7]A voice on tape wakes him more gently that an alarm clock by saying: "Wake up...wake up...."

[8]The title of this unpublished and unproduces play is, The Invalid's Wife. van Vogt has plans to make it available to colleges and Universities in the United States.

[9]van Vogt, A. E. The Money Personality. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1972.